

Dyna-mite

KEF's new Picoforte
One iPod dock does a
lot in a small space,
says David Price...

With the Apple iPod's not inconspicuous sales success, there's plenty of incentive for a company like KEF to put their wide experience in grown-up speakers to good use by making a partnering audio product. Massive potential sales aside, the fact that most existing iPod docking systems are so poor is all the more reason for KEF to dip its corporate toe into this pond.

Enter the Picoforte - not for KEF a cheap piece of plastic rubbish, cynically overpriced and overmarketed. Rather, it's very much a high quality KEF product in miniature. The system is beautifully finished, with only the likes of Eclipse's TD307II PA, costing just a few pounds short of £400, able to compete. Each component is milled from diecast zinc and finished in either high gloss black or white. This stands in contrast to the usual dire plastic mouldings you find in so many other iPod partners.

The system comprises separate dock and amplifier modules, plus a pair of matching miniature loudspeakers. It looks and feels very nice altogether, especially if the various wires are dressed carefully. The dock connects to the power amplifier, which has miniature spring clip speaker terminals, as do the speakers, which makes connecting the whole system up a matter of five minutes. When you've plugged in the DC power input from the mains adaptor, it's simply a case of slotting in your iPod. KEF supply a range of dock connectors, but I never bother with these things and found my 3G iPod Nano went straight in without a fuss. This done, the whole system is controllable from the supplied card remote - and don't lose it because the controls aren't duplicated on the unit itself! There's also a 3.5mm minijack input for owners of other MP3 players, MiniDisc portables, *et al.*

The bundled speakers are

downsized versions of KEF's KHT series 'eggs', and are a textbook example of how to do a miniature transducer. The cabinets are metal, meaning at 1kg apiece they're weighty and fairly inert (their very shape contributing to the latter). Measuring just 160mm high and featuring a 75mm Uni-Q mid/bass driver with 9mm aluminium tweeter inset, power handling is said to be 25W per side. The amplifier sports an optional subwoofer connection, and there's an S-Video connection so a screen can be used to display song titles or even play movies (if your iPod allows).

SOUND QUALITY

Obviously, the sonic results depend very much on how the speakers are positioned - they seemed happiest very close to a wall, Blu-Tacked to whatever they were sitting on. Suitably set up and run in, the Picoforte gave an impressively room filling sound that was bristling with detail. Fed from a 3G Apple iPod Nano running 320kbps AAC, it proved surprisingly couth at the price, with just a little liveliness coming from those metal dome tweeters. This diminished as the system was run in, and also was ameliorated by playing lossless files (i.e. uncompressed) with their smoother top end. Even substituting speaker cables helped; although I doubt many will use the Black

Rhodium Tango that I tried the KEF speakers with!

Warmed through and run in, this made a very companionable little system, good enough to give satisfying sound from my iPod along with very easy access - the remote worked well. It went decently loud (enough for small bedrooms, studies, etc.) and importantly even at maximum volume it didn't fall apart, showing no obvious signs of distress. Although obviously bass-light (KEF quote 90Hz to 30kHz frequency response), it unlocked music in quite a professional way - attack transients were fast, dynamics impressive and there was no sense of anything in the system struggling.

CONCLUSION

On reflection, I'd have liked to have tried the matching subwoofer, as I suspect this would really fill the sound out and take the Picoforte up to a new level. My only criticism of this system is simply the fact that it's a direct price rival for the Harman Kardon Go & Play, which is an altogether ballsier and punchier performer able to push out significantly higher sound levels. Still, even it cannot match the KEF Picoforte's clarity and detail, and the latter has the benefit of separate, detachable speakers which may really come into their own in some rooms. A truly impressive product, well worth a listen.



REFERENCE SYSTEM

Apple iPod Nano 8GB 3G
 Harman Kardon Go & Play

VERDICT

Beautifully built, elegantly designed iPod speaker system with a couth, clean and detailed sound.

KEF PICOFORTE

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FOR

- engagingly musical sound
- midband detail
- imaging
- build

AGAINST

- lacks bass
- faces stiff competition